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# LOST STARS

BY STARK YOUNG

IN Michelangelo's chapel one March day I was looking at the *Pensieroso* and thinking what a terrible intensity of living and of spiritual passion was there expressed beneath the poise and sophistication of that figure, what a brooding mystery of shadow was on those eyelids against the delicate finish and distinction of that face. I noted the suave elegance of the surface, and how the slight affectation was here spiritualized by the inner violence and force of the artist.

In the midst of these thoughts I turned suddenly and became aware of a lady sitting in the middle of the room. She was dressed in gray with a cherry color here and there on it; her eyes and her hair gave the impression of a dark violet; and there was a beautiful clear melancholy about her face. I knew at once that she was English—by the expression; by the figure, which was slimmer than that of the Continental women; and by the bit of ruching which she wore at her throat and which was just enough to rout the French perfection of her gown and leave it persistently her own rather than the dressmaker's. She sat there in one of those low Savonarola chairs, looking up quietly at the statue of the Medici with his elegant, intense body and the shadow over his eyes. Behind her chair a man stood, a ruddy, athletic Englishman in tweeds, very smart and very carelessly correct all over, a retired army man I should have said from a first glance at him. His manner, when there was any, toward the lady had the air of protecting her—that was about all. He looked less at the Medici than she did and more around and up and down the chapel. Presently I left the two of them there like that and forgot them.

The first week of April I went down to Assisi for the coming of spring.

Assisi is one of those hill towns in Italy built all of stone. It sits there on the top of the hill, brown and pale rose and ivory-

color. The stone houses come down sharp against the stone of the street; and the whole of the town is dry and ancient and quiet; though so small and wayward as it climbs about, and so gentle with the memories of St. Francis, that no one could be afraid of it. But down below these high walls and thick gates the soft, green country runs away to the valley below; olive-trees, vineyards; green and gray lands pointed with black cypresses; serene as an idyll, and through that Umbrian air as mild as images in water.

On my very first day I recognized at luncheon, sitting there at a corner table half way on to the balcony, the man and woman I had seen in Florence together. And at a table not far away was another English woman, smaller and more animated, but unmistakably English. A stocky, dark man was with her.

Afterwards I used to see the beautiful English woman and her companion in the garden together or with the two others standing on the terrace, or met them walking along the roads; but we never spoke. The other pair I did come to know before long, and we used to sit from time to time on the terrace and talk, over coffee or peaches and wine. What the relation of these two was, whether they were married or not, I could never make out. But what I did notice was that after a while the man got to sitting more and more in his room alone; and I came to have longer talks with the lady. And she, I noticed, had got into the way of drinking a little too much, and so, when she talked, to opening her heart more freely than she might have done.

One lazy afternoon she came out on the terrace where I was lounging with a new edition of Morselli's *Glauco* on my knees; and popping herself down opposite me she ordered Vermouth and began to chatter.

Did I know Mrs. Abercrombie? Nor Major Neville? Not yet. Fancy that! Didn't I think her very handsome? I did, very handsome, especially her fine carriage, a movement more like an Italian woman than any lady from the British Isles, if she would pardon my saying so; for English women as a rule do not walk well.

"*Mais non alors par exemple,*" she replied to that, "but not at all, I haven't been knocking over the world for nothing. Say what you like." She leaned over, "But do you really know who

she is? My dear friend, that's the Mrs. Abercrombie that the English newspapers have been talking about, whose suit for divorce has just been granted; she got it. She's one of the most famous people in England, I rather fancy. Have you read it all, columns and columns?"

"I'm afraid I have not. There are so many divorces," I answered.

"But hers is a different story. Poor dear, I think she is very plucky, I do. Shall I tell you? It's one of those cases where you'd swear fate had a grudge against a mortal. Only, look at her, when you are that beautiful—well—capacity attracts, as the Indians say."

"But I should not say she looked happy, do you think?"

"No, perhaps not. Something about the eyes. About that restless moving around—no, perhaps not. But I must tell you. My dear, what a story! When she was eighteen she fell violently in love with an Oxford man, I don't remember his name, but it was a good one, not of the nobility exactly but connected on all sides with the nobility. Her parents objected but she would marry him; and why not? She loved him: ah, *cette extase ancienne!* *Mon cher*, do you like French poetry? But soon after the marriage she found that he drank; drank very hard, and harder and harder after a while. She found herself left at home night after night: he meant well enough but he was weak. His parents, to make matters worse for her, were very strict; they had brought him up in a house where wine was not allowed anywhere, not even in the servants' hall. All his father could do was to storm and threaten to cut him off, and his mother prayed and told May, that's Mrs. Abercrombie, to use her influence more strongly to reclaim her husband. A case of, '*Parle-lui tous les jours des vertus de son père, et quelquefois aussi parle-lui de sa mère,*' if you like that stuffy Racine and his *Andromaque*. Perhaps May liked to enjoy herself a little, who knows, and why shouldn't she? She was so young and had married before she had had any social experience at all. *Combien je regrette*—Béranger? Am I drawing it out? Well at any rate it got so bad that she saw that the only thing to do was to separate him from his London associations. She went to Australia with him, where the family had investments. At first it

was better, perhaps the new life helped. At any rate she roughed it and in spite of her homesickness stuck it out for two years. But by that time he was drinking again, and she simply got up and brought him back to England—for you can see yourself, my dear, what was the use? In London they went to live with his parents, thinking that might be better. His mother told May that she ought to stay in in the evenings and amuse her husband and keep him out of harm's way. Night after night May stayed there. But her husband fell in with his old friends and started drinking again. And since his family thought it improper for her to go out alone or with other men, May just sat there with these two dreadful old people. Finally one night the idea came into her head to run away. She walked out of the house and went to the Cecil near by. There she ordered a fire in her room, cigarettes and a bottle of champagne; and proposed to spend a happy evening once again, free. About ten o'clock the door opened and her husband's mother and father came in; and she sitting there with the champagne and cigarettes before the fire. Imagine! *Madrigal triste!* She had registered under her own name and they had had no trouble in finding her. They persuaded her to go home with them, said that she might get a divorce or anything, but let's not have a scandal. But she could not bear that life again and after a month went away quietly to an apartment of her own and started proceedings for a separation. Perhaps she had a rather gay life then, I don't know. At any rate, my dear, just then Henry Abercrombie came back from Canada and looked her up; he had heard she was in trouble. Doesn't it sound like a novelette? Wait till you hear this. At the same time her husband had a fall from his horse, fox-hunting, and was killed. So she and Henry after less than a year were married. They took an apartment together with an old friend of Henry's who had just married also. Life seemed happier than it had ever been and two or three years passed like that, Henry a devoted husband. But his health was not good and they decided to come to the Riviera for the winter, that was last year, you know. And then when they were stopping at Arles on the way down, what should the poor thing do but break her leg. That laid her up. So they wrote to the friend in London with whom they had been living to come and

join them at Arles; it was very dreary you see waiting there. And just before the friend came, as luck would have it, May found a note from Henry, a violent love letter. She taxed her friend with it, who confessed, and the truth came out that Henry and this woman had been in love with each other for months. They had struggled against it but found themselves swept along. All that time he was deceiving her, May had thought Henry the most faithful lover imaginable. Well, she left him there and came on down to Florence. And there she found Ted Neville, who had written her already that he had retired from the army and come home from India, and would like to see her and her husband, for he had no family of his own and all that money. So there you are, and what do you think of that?"

"She has got her divorce, you said?" I asked. "Then will they marry?"

"I don't think she will. She's had enough of it. Would you blame her? And nobody knows what relation they have between them, whether they are like sister and brother or what. I'm sure I don't. Perhaps Ted's loved her from childhood. An Englishman can be like that, you know, faithful as long as life lasts. But that ought to seem easy. A race that can be faithful to boiled potatoes and boiled green-stuff every day for half a century ought to be able to remain faithful to a human being, don't you think?" She laughed gaily and took another glass of Vermouth. "I don't believe May loves him. I'm sure she doesn't, poor thing; she's got nothing to do all day but read novels, and she's taking too much wine, I think. Do you notice it?"

I said I noticed Mrs. Abercrombie had more of a kind of flush around the eyes than she had had when I saw her in Florence, if that meant anything. That was it, my friend said, and what else was there to do out here in the hills? She went on:

"But May's good enough, she's just full of life and the devil, that's all. What do you think?"

I said there must be something in Mrs. Abercrombie that gave an opening for some of the bad fortune.

"Oh, I daresay," Mrs. Vivian replied to that, and waved her fingers as if to ask what that had to do with it.

"But what will become of her? Will she do anything for herself?"

"Now who knows that, my dear?" Mrs. Vivian answered. "My dear! Ted would marry her whether he loved her or not, he's such a good fellow, poor dear. But he loves her: she's so pathetic even if she doesn't whine and howl, and the pathetic is irresistible, you know that. *Que m'importe que tu sois sage? Sois belle! et sois triste!* But Italy is full of people like this. And what would you have? It's something to have the courage to carry things through and not stop *jusqu'au dernier point exclusivement*, as I read once in Rabelais —" she rattled on, and I could see that she was seeing herself now in the light of smart French comedy—life following art again rather than art, life—and she seemed very weak and scatter-brained and hopeless, and yet tenacious, with her little brown face and busy eyes. Beyond a certain point life could not hit her.

I sat there long after twilight had closed, thinking how many people there were indeed like this in Italy. They float about unquestioned and have no part in the life around them. They are fleeing from something, most of them; from scandal at home, from family ties, or money troubles; but mostly from themselves. Many of them had possibilities in them once, these people like Mrs. Abercrombie and this Ted Neville of hers and Mrs. Vivian; and they have made a mess of it. They just missed being something; but how much they are failures I would not say until I knew how far most of us can be called a success. They have wanted overmuch of life, perhaps, more than their fortunes or their natures granted them. The ordinary human creature is willing to take the humdrum of the ordinary life; and neither asks nor cares very long for much besides. These people are at least better than that; they refuse to accept the humdrum and the drab; they have something in them that will not have it, and that drives through to some reality, however fateful or disastrous it may be. But where they come short is that they will not or cannot take the humdrum and give it reality, fill it out, endure the surface for a warmer content that they can put into it. They have not the patience, perhaps, for living.

People like these have enthusiasm, feeling, courage, brilliance sometimes, and charm and kindness; qualities that would seem to go to making up life and art as tube-colors to making up a

picture. But their lives are never able to find a center; their courage and enthusiasm and kindliness and so on remain only colors degenerating into poorer values, the reckless or maudlin or sentimental; their passionate endowment turns into mere exhaustion or luxury or animality; and their charm fades for lack of that spiritual translucence which alone can make it outlast youth. Only those who have the character to keep their own reality regardless of events and places, can endure such violent wrenching from the common soil and from some kind of social system that might serve to prop them up.

Nearly all of them love beauty of some sort; and because they love beauty they are pitiful, even though they have not the strength to desire it or pursue it as far as greater souls can do. And who minds them after all; and why need we resent their vagaries and their moods, their little self-defense of arrogances, their loose and uncertain ways of life? They are only like gifted children that do not grow up; they have souls that are a little more than the common but will never mature. They carry their idleness about Italy, living sometimes in luxury and sometimes very hard; and they take their fill of beauty feverishly out of personal relationships when they have any, and lazily out of Italy herself, her light, her gardens and seas, and those towns of hers, Ravenna, Perugia, Cortona and the rest, that are like as many poems in their quality and difference. "The orphans of the heart must turn to thee," Byron, the greatest of them all, wrote in Italy once; Italy feeds them and gives their loose and pitiful natures something that holds them to her, roaming here and there as they do, never really at home, like poor, vague stars wandering toward the rim of heaven.

On the first of May I was leaving for Florence again. Night had fallen when I sent my luggage ahead and set off down the winding hillside road to the station below. Along the way the olive orchards covered the slopes; a blue air was under the misty trees and on the ground there was a faint, hovering light. I remember thinking as I walked along that there was a kind of mystical necessity, like the urgency of dreams, for a figure moving among these shadowy trees, in this misty light and quiet land. And then suddenly at a turn of the road I saw someone coming down the slope: a white shape whose progress seemed to be



ineffably recorded by the dark trunks that it passed, and whose dim whiteness seemed to gather round it the whiteness of the air. It came closer and was the figure of a woman, walking alone; she was moving quietly, with one hand held slightly out.

Presently I saw sitting on the low wall that marked the farm off from the road, a man, and recognized the Englishman. I stopped short, for I hated to intrude. And then while I stood there wondering if there might be some path that I might take, one of the little short-cuts through the fields, I heard him call to her; and then her low, warm voice:

“What is it, Ted?”

“Nothing. I thought you might like it here, you know.” He made a short gesture with his stick in the direction of the hills.

“Yes,” I heard her say then, “look at the light there. And the valley. How quiet it is! Give me a cigarette, old dear.”

He lighted her cigarette for her and they sat there a moment before he spoke:

“I must say it’s rather jolly here, you know.”

STARK YOUNG.